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ABSTRACT

Focusing on the issue of the training and preparation of the communication specialist in communication consulting, an investigation of the persuasive elements in the client-consulting relationship suggests that more direct focus on consulting as persuasion can lead to more responsible and effective enactment of the role of both consultant and client. Although the current emphasis in communication consulting is on skills and theories needed as a base for effective consulting, the actual role of persuasion is rarely addressed. At least two benefits exist in examining the persuasive nature of consulting: (1) when both client and consultant are aware of the persuasive context of their relationship, they can be sensitive to their relative responsibilities, and (2) this perspective provides access to the research, theory, and skills involved in the concept of persuasion. During the different phases of the consulting process--entry, diagnosis response, and disengagement--different persuasive elements are involved, including attribution instability and evaluation apprehension in the entry phase, and reactance theory in the response phase. Because persuasion theory and skills are required for effective consulting, persuasion training programs are needed for key members of organizations which utilize consultants. (Twenty-four references are appended.) (MM)

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Communication Consulting As Persuasion: Issues and Implications

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Abstract

With the increasing popularity of, and professional involvement in communication consulting, there is growing concern as to the training and preparation of the communication specialist. An investigation of the persuasive elements in the client-consultant relationship suggests that more direct focus on consulting as persuasion can lead to more responsible and effective enactment of both the role of consultant and client. The interface between persuasion and consultation is explored, and research issues are proposed.

Introduction

The role of the communication specialist as an organizational consultant has become a more popular and familiar role in business (Alderton, 1983; Redding, 1979; Rudolph & Johnson, 1983). As organizations come to realize that they are, first and last, communication systems, and that communication directly impacts on the ability of the organization to meet its goals, more organizations are convinced that communication consultants can contribute to productivity. As a result, increasing numbers of academics are capitalizing on opportunities to consult within organizations.

Because organizational consulting is still a young practice for communication specialists, communication theorists address this increasing interest with expressed concern about the nature and qualifications of those entering the consulting area (Alderton, 1983; Goldberg, 1983; Redding, 1979). Redding (1979) charges that the consultant "occupies a role which always has the potential of doing irreparable damage to many persons" (p. 348). Alderton (1983) addresses colleagues' concerns that consultants will "engage in a helping relationship without an adequate theoretical or experiential background" (p. 413), and offers relevant guidelines for the consulting course design.

Yet, even in these discussions, as also throughout the wealth of texts written to guide and train consultants (Bell & Nadler, 1979; Blake & Mouton, 1976; Cummings, Long & Lewis, 1983; Kurpuis, 1978; Lippitt & Lippitt, 1978; Pace, 1983; Schein, 1969), one vital aspect of the role of consultant is either totally neglected or explored only tentatively--namely, the role of the consultant as persuader and the persuasive nature of the consultant-client relationship. This paper will directly investigate the relationship between consulting and persuasion, the issues which emerge when consulting is seen as persuasion, and the resulting implication for training and research in consulting.

Consulting As Persuasion

Consulting Defined

Fest and Papageorgiou (1976) offer a comprehensive definition of the communication consultant role:

> Ideally, a communication specialist aids an organization in identifying and attacking communication problems and provides means for the organization to realize its communication potential. Such a person is basically an agent of change. He or she may work as an employee of the organization in the capacity of training administrator or Director of Communication, or as an external consultant hired as an

> independent contractor to provide specific services (p. 22).

Whether the communication consultant's role is in human resource development or organizational development, the consensus view is that "consulting is a helping activity that often leads to change in the organization" (Rudolph & Johnson, 1983, p. 3). Pace (1983), Redding (1979), and Goldhaber (1983) all emphasize the role of consultant as change agent, and discuss the helping relationship between the client and consultant. Organizational development is repeatedly characterized as a "managed" "systematic" or "planned" change effort within the organization (Cummings, Long & Lewis, 1983; Koehler, Anatol & Applbaum, 1981).

With this emphasis on "change" as an intent of the consultant, and the acknowledgement of the "helping" nature of the relationship, the role of persuasion in consulting becomes more relevant.

Persuasion Defined

Definitions of persuasion include such sweeping generalizations suggesting that all communication is persuasive in nature (Berlo, 1960) through more specific descriptions differentiating persuasion from concepts such as inducements, social influence and authority (Fotheringham, 1966; Tedeschi, 1972).

Anderson (1978) describes persuasion as "communication in which the communicator seeks...to effect a desired, voluntary change..." (p. 7). Cummings et al. (1983) note that persuasion

"can be viewed as an attempt to change or reinforce how people think, feel, or behave" (p. 207).

Brembeck and Howell (1976) define persuasion as "communication intended to influence choice" (p. 19). On all accounts, the consultant's predetermined goal of change within the client system qualifies the consultant as a persuader.

The Helping Relationship

The implications for this persuasive role become more obvious when the relationship between consultant and client is further investigated through a comparison to the helping relationship found in psychotherapy. Frank (1976) addresses the intense focusing of persuasive elements inherent in the helping relationship between patient and therapist. As in the therapeutic relationship, the communication consultant comes into a client system because it is experiencing, or is expecting, some disequilibrium. The consultant enters into the relationship as a person with authority (Lippitt and Nadler, 1979). The intervention process is designed as a "deliberate interference with an ongoing process with the intent to alter and improve that process" (Koehler et al., p. 329). The communication consultant, just by the mere action of selecting to accept the client system, offers the client hope of healing just as the therapist offers hope to the patient. Especially relevant to this comparative discussion is the process model of consulting where both the client and consultant involve themselves and assume responsibility in all phases. In addition to the overtly stated goal of

change, this relationship contains the more subtle persuasive elements similar to Frank's discussion of persuasion in nondirective or evocative therapies.

Current Emphasis

Writings in communication consulting directly address skills and theories needed as a base for effective consulting. Although some of these are related to persuasion, the actual role of persuasion is rarely addressed. Credibility, ethics, critical thinking, maturity, nonverbal skills, decision making, awareness of organizational objectives trends and pressures, social sensitivity, and small group skills are among those noted frequently. The word "persuasion" is avoided and only indirectly addressed through reference to concepts such as "principles...to help prevent resistance" (Cummings et al., 1983; Gibb, 1979) and terms such as "motivation" and "influence." Not until consulting is openly addressed from the perspective of persuasion can the full array of issues and implications be investigated.

Emergent Issues

Once one is willing to address the consulting role and relationship as a persuasive role and relationship, a number of issues come more clearly into focus.

Client-Consultant Awareness

One fundamental consequence when both client and consultant are aware of the persuasive context of the relationship is the

potential for both parties to more appropriately enact their roles and to be sensitive to the related responsibilities. This would mean that the client as receiver would be conscious of the voluntary nature of participation in persuasion and would be encouraged to prepare self for the persuadee role through a self analysis of reasons for involvement, goals to be sought, and functions served through the interaction (Kenneth Anderson, 1978, p. 84).

This awareness would also compel the consultant as persuader to be aware of the art of persuasion which requires insight and judgment in applying theory and skills. The consultant would be more willing to recognize the full impact of the consulting role, the exercising of power, and the potential for manipulation.

Persuasive Concepts in Consulting Phases

A second benefit to addressing the persuasive nature of consulting is that this perspective then opens to the consultant the wealth of research, theory and skills which has evolved out of a rich history of investigation in persuasion. One way of organizing these issues relevant to the consulting setting is to consider those concepts which could possibly apply during the different phases of the consulting process -- entry, diagnosis, response, and disengagement (Bell and Nadler, 1979). Although the following discussion will not be an exhaustive treatment of emerging issues, it will allow for an initial introduction which gives evidence to the value of applying persuasion theory and research.

During the entry phase, the consultant is contacted due to the system's inability to successfully adjust to a changing environment. Persuasion issues relevant to this phase evolve out of the client's possible susceptibility to influence. Tedeschi (1972), Zimbardo and Ebbeson (1970), and Frank (1974) discuss a variety of concepts and research results which could strongly reflect the power and influence a consultant would have in the consulting relationship. These include: 1) the legitimization inherent in the consultant role (compliance of client due to the socially prescribed role of consultant); 2) attribution instability (the client's susceptibility to influence due to low self confidence and the contrasting confidence and strength of the consultant); 3) evaluation apprehension (the anticipation of what the consultant will find wrong, and the opinion the consultant will form of the client and client system); 4) the influence of the consultant's expectations (through cues so subtle neither client nor consultant are aware); and 5) the manipulative potential of the role induction interview (whereby the therapist-consultant attempts to tailor the patient-client expectations to what will actually occur in the relationship and intervention, thereby heightening the latter's interest and optimism, yet at the same time prescribing the client's role).

Persuasion issues relevant to the diagnosis phase are strongly grounded in the audience analysis research; the consultant must develop an appreciation of the client system's culture, values, norms etc... If the process consulting model approach is

utilized by the consultant, the involvement of the client in the consulting itself has further persuasive implications during both the diagnosis and response phases. Persuasive studies support that the individual is more likely to change if participating in the process (Frank, 1974; Tedeschi, 1972), so again the client is more susceptible to change. A "placebo affect" of sorts may also be operating as the actual introduction of the consultant into the organization could counter organization apathy and begin that change. The process of giving "interpretations" (labeling the experiences and problems within the organization) influences the client's cognitions and at the same time has the potential of increasing the client's sense of control and decreasing anxiety level (Frank, 1974, pp. 222-225).

It is during the response phase that the consultant moves into the action step through structured intervention. It is here that persuasion is more blatant as the consultant attempts to persuade the management to adopt or to drop a particular approach, where the consultant can become an advocate for a particular position or methodology (Lippitt and Nadler, 1979). Other less blatantly persuasive elements might include: 1) reactance theory (Hughes & Falk, 1981) whereby the client feels their freedom threatened so reacts aggressively and rejects consultant's suggestions (so consultant would utilize reactance minimization techniques); 2) identification (the impact of the consultant's behavior as a model for imitation -- especially strong in long-term relationships in which one person feels

dependent on another); 3) the impact of the consultant as "anticipated audience" for the client system (studies in this area suggest that a consultant could exert considerable influence between sessions as the client thinks of the consultant, how the consultant would handle the problem or react to certain experiences; the client may even prepare or "rehearse" what they will say when the consultant returns).

The final phase, disengagement where the consultant evaluates results and closes the relationship, may also contain elements of persuasion. Again, the research in active participation of the persuadee in the process not only suggests facilitated attitude change, but also increased persistence of the change (Frank, 1974, Zimbardo & Ebbessen, 1969). Again, there is the inherent tendency to modify behavior in a way which demonstrates improvement according to the consultant's bias; how enduring will this be after the consultant disengages? The process of enacting Lewin's "refreezing" (Koehler et al., 1981) of the organization (enacting regulations and procedures which consolidate the changes) also carries persuasive implications. Issues of persuasive influence still must be addressed should the client remain dependent on the consultant. Finally, one additional perspective of persuasive impact must not be overlooked -- in what way has the consultant been changed by utilizing persuasive techniques within the client system.

Other Persuasion Issues

The preceding discussion organized around the phases of consultation is only one configuration for addressing persuasion issues. Still not addressed here is the application of the more familiar theories such as: learning theories, consistency theories, functional theories. Nor does this analysis address the traditional persuasive modes of ethos, pathos, logos. Inevitably, by discussing consulting as persuasion (regardless of the persuasive direction), one ultimately must address the ethical issues related to the consultant-client relationship. Interestingly enough, much has been written addressing ethical considerations. Yet, it seems impossible to thoroughly address ethical issues if the persuasive aspects of the relationship have not been thoroughly explored. It is imperative to address consulting as persuasion as a base to any complete consideration of consulting ethics.

Implications for Training and Research

Given the preceding discussion, it is evident that training in persuasion theory and skills is a vital component of an effective and responsible consultant's program. Not only should the consultant be aware of past research, but the consultant must also strive to stay abreast of current persuasion research.

Other implications for training may evolve from a different perspective -- that of training client systems for effective and responsible utilization of consultants. It may be timely to

begin to develop persuasion training programs for key members of organizations which utilize consultants.

When one considers consulting as persuasion, directions for research within the organizational setting also begin to emerge. Research needs to be conducted in the general area of client sensitivity to influence, specifically focusing on the impact of evaluation apprehension, emotional/stressed state of the client system, consultant expectations, placebo effect of client's favorable expectations, the possibility of legitimization, and the impact of the entry interview on client behavior.

Other research issues include a fully developed investigation of the persuasive elements of the consulting setting. One aspect of that investigation should be a study of the changes within the consultant as a result of utilizing persuasive techniques. Another aspect should not only attempt to directly measure change in the organization but also to more thoroughly address the "refreezing" of the client system behaviors and enduring effects of the intervention. In many cases, past studies in attitude change, power, motivation etc... could be adapted to the organizational setting and repeated to assess relevance and application of persuasive concepts and theories.

Conclusion

This treatise did not propose to generate new theory, but to illuminate and draw parallels between persuasive concepts and current practices in communication consulting. Communication

consulting as persuasion is rarely and only tentatively discussed in current consulting literature. Yet a persuasive perspective compels both the consultant and client to a deeper awareness of the forces operating in this helping relationship. Redding (1979) notes that the experienced communication consultant of the 1980's will require "the ethos, philosophical grounding, professional expertise, and methodological competence to accept a wide variety of demanding high risk tasks" (p. 351). For responsible and effective consulting, it is imperative that the consultant also develop a thorough grounding in persuasion theory and skills.

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